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ABSTRACT

Psychologists have long been interested in the causes of student success or failure in college. In the late 1950's, investigators began to examine behaviors beyond the cognitive realm as crucial elements in the student's adaptation to college life. Research on adolescents' transition from high school to college identified several components of coping. Other research concentrated on internal processes, exploring the personality dynamics of students with varying levels of mental health. Gradually, increased attention was given to situation-specific coping; behavior-analytic approaches and approaches defining the developmental tasks of college-age students were used in research. The 1970's saw further testing of the theories originated in the 1960's. The study of college students' coping with stress has focused on emotional stress, as indicated by depression or suicidal thoughts, and specific stressful situations, such as test anxiety. Other researchers have explored college students' reactions to different situations. Coping, once conceptualized as a trait, is now conceptualized as a process; cognitive and behavioral steps, the elements of effective coping, have been identified. Future research must incorporate these research findings into a larger framework that leads to a greater understanding of coping. (NRB)

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Theories of Coping: Retrospect and Contemporary Trends*

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Theories of Coping: Retrospect and Contemporary Trends

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During the last twenty years the topic of coping has more and more frequently become the subject of study. In 1960, Psychological Abstracts listed no articles under "coping;" in the first six months of 1980 there were 81. One population that has been particularly well studied is college students. Part of this, no doubt, is due to their proximity to researchers, but in recent years there has been increasing concern for special groups within the college population: minorities, women, and older returning students. In these cases, the study of coping in college students is directed toward ways to facilitate these peoples' passage into and through the college environment. This paper briefly reviews the study of coping during these past twenty years, in order to assess where we have come and where we are headed. It is offered as a background for the papers that will be presented by my colleagues on this panel.

Psychologists and educators have long been interested in the causes of student's success or failure in college. Numerous studies,over many decades, had assessed various intellectual requirements of college success. In the late 1950's and early 1960's investigators began to take a closer look at activities and behaviors beyond the cognitive realm that also appear to play a crucial part in adaptation to college life. A group of researchers including Earle Silber, David Hamburg, George Coelho, Leonard Pearlin, and others, undertook an investigation of the way in which adolescents made the transition from high school to college

(Coelho, Hamburg, Murphey, 1963; Silber, Hamburg, Coelho, Murphey, Rosenberg, Pearlin, 1961). This study was ground-breaking in at least two ways: (1) It studied adolescents at the time of the transition, that is, it was not retrospective, and (2) the study focused on people who were thought to be healthy, competent individuals so that the healthy processes, themselves, could be understood. These features of this work were to shape the study of college students over the next two decades. These authors identified several components of coping: (1) preliminary attitudes toward the new environment, (2) developing a self-image adequate to the new environment, and (3) maintaining distress within manageable limits. Silber and his colleagues found that competent adolescents expressed positive attitudes toward the new college environment and enjoyed mastering this new experience. They chose a variety of ways of developing an adequate self-image, including role-rehearsal, learning about the new situation in advance, and recalling contrasts between past and present. In managing distress effectively, these students were comforted with the knowledge that others were facing similar problems and constructively used worry in preparation for dealing with the sometimes stressful reality. Of course, there were many other techniques for dealing with the problems of college life, but these provide some general ideas about how students cope in college.

McGuire, Veldman, and I had meanwhile been studying mental health and coping in preservice teachers (Peck, 1962), following insights gained from research on the mental health of normal adults (Peck, 1959). This work assessed students' personalities through the use of

projective techniques such as the TAT, Sentence Completion, and with self-report questionnaires. Through these measures, we were able to describe the personality dynamics of students with low, moderate, and high mental health. For example, we found that students in the low group had many intense, self-centered desires; strong conflicting emotions; poor forethought and self-discipline; and some kinds of destructive interpersonal behavior. Those students with very good mental health vigorously developed their capacities, led active and satisfying interpersonal relationships, and were capable of feeling emotions deeply. Their thinking was clear and farsighted, and their personalities were integrated. In this type of research there was a clear concentration on internal processes, although the capacity for effective human relationships was also assessed.

Another study, by Mechanic (1962), focused on the coping and defensive strategies of graduate students who are facing qualifying exams. Again, he found these students engaged in some of the same types of activities to manage this type of stress. Some of their methods of coping included: comforting themselves by thinking pleasant thoughts, drawing on past experiences, and identification with others undergoing similar experiences. These students also engaged in some activities that were not as adaptive, such as avoidance, hostility, and magical thinking. This research has provided some good desciptive concepts for the understanding of coping.

The approach to the study of coping gradually changed, after this, in two ways. There was increasing attention to situation-specific coping; and there was further refinement and elaboration of the concept of coping. One such study was Mechanic's. Another study specified a

broader range and type of situations, and their interaction with coping processes (Goldfried & D'Zurilla, 1969).

Goldfried and D'Zurilla (1969) began a behavior-analytic approach to the study of competence of college students. They defined competence operationally as the "effectiveness or adequacy with which an individual is capable of responding to the various problematic situations which confront him (p. 161)." The behavior-analytic approach includes: (a) defining stressful situations, (b) determining the possible responses to that situation, (c) deciding which responses are effective coping strategies, (d) developing an instrument to measure response to the situations, and (e) evaluating the measure. Of 600 possible situations, 181 were determined to have a high probability of occurrence for male freshmen. Using other criteria, thirty problematic situations (academic and interpersonal) were selected for study. A measure was constructed that included these thirty situations, plus possible responses to them. Students were asked to pick their most "likely" response, i.e. how they "actually react?" At the time of this study, the scoring criteria had not been constructed. However, these researchers presented an innovative model of defining situations and coping strategies. Obviously their approach is geared to very specific situations, and this competence is defined on a situation-by-situation basis. Supposedly, some overall rating of competence could be made by taking a percentage of the time a student chose effective coping strategies.

Goldfried and D'Zurilla (1969) also proposed a treatment program for college freshmen to help them cope effectively in all situations. The treatment involves teaching an "orientation" to problematic

situations designed to encourage independent problem-solving behavior and a specific set of "cognitive operations" which include: (a) making a careful statement of the problem, (b) making a search for possible alternative solutions, (c) selecting the best solutions, and (d) verifying the solutions by enacting them. Techniques for teaching these cognitive operations include verbal instructions and discussion, role playing, and programmed text. These operations are very similar to the process of coping described by Peck and his colleagues in an international study (Peck, et al., 1979).

A different, complementary approach has been the definition of the psychological progresses required to meet the developmental tasks of college age. Robert Havighurst and Erik Erikson have contributed most to our understanding of developmental life tasks. Heath and Chickering have both used this approach to study college students. Heath (1965) suggests five areas in which a person should achieve competence: (1) stability of organization, the person is capable of resisting and recovering from disorganizing influences; (2) integration of new information, the person incorporates information into his/her self-organization; (3) allocentrism, the person is less dominated by self needs and more open to the needs of others and the world around him; (4) symbolic representation of experience, the person can mentally coordinate the internal and external worlds, and (5) autonomy, the person is increasingly less determined by situational influences and more under self control. Heath views these as the major tasks of the young adult.

For Chickering (1969) one major developmental task is managing emotions, that is, the ability to experience one's feelings, yet be in control of them. The person must also learn to be autonomous, to be able to deal with problems without seeking help, and to be able to pursue his own particular needs and desires. Third, the person must establish an identity, a sense of who he or she is. Fourth, the person needs to develop more satisfying-trusting interpersonal relationships. A fifth important task for the young adult is the clarifying of purposes, that is, the problem of deciding what one wants to do and be in life. Finally, Chickering notes the task of developing integrity. This involves the clarification of the person's beliefs so as to provide a tentative guide to behavior. There is some overlap between the developmental tasks suggested by these writers. The ideas each presents gives us an increasingly clear picture of the problems and promises of entering adulthood.

In the 1970's, research on college student coping has proliferated. Most of the word has tested theories of college coping which were originated in the 1960's. On the whole, the research efforts have been less general and more situation-specific than the previous work.

The study of how college students cope with stress has usually focused on emotional stress, as indicated by depression or suicidal thoughts, or on specific, stressful situations, such as test anxiety. Fundabike (1977) used the behavioral-analytic approach (Goldfried and D'Zurrila, 1969) to develop an assessment instrument to discern the level of coping effectiveness among college undergraduates in highly problematic situations. A population of college students who had problems with

depression and suicidal thoughts were presented the College Coping Inventory (CCI), which asks students to pick ways to handle thirty problematic situations in college (academic and social). The results showed depressed students lacked social skills, and depressed college student males were sensitive to adversive stimuli. In another study, Hammen (1978) found that non-depressed college students do not show distorted perceptions of stressful life events, but depressed college students show more cognitive bias with low-life stresses than with highly stressful life events. In another study, dropouts from the U. S. Naval Academy freshman year, considered a stressful environment, were distinguished from the remaining students using Cattell's 16 Personality Factors test. Dropouts tended to be self-sufficient students who preferred to rely on their own decisions rather than be group-dependent. Apparently, these students did not find it possible to meet the strong conformity demands by forming affiliative ties with the other students, which is a common strategy in stressful group situations.

Another major way of studying college coping has been to look at how college students handle different situations. Manasola (1976) constructed the Coping Style Questionnaire (CSQ) to find out how international students handled problems in their new environment. The main findings indicate that students from the Eastern Hemisphere experience more stress, and that the females of this group tend to utilize human services on campus, while the males try to be self-sufficient.

Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976) studied the stressful situations graduate students encounter and the styles of emotional coping they

use in these situations. This study makes a significant contribution to conceptions of coping by delineating problem situations, and to coping measurement, by using three-mode factor analysis to study trait-by-situation interactions. Several pilot studies were done to determine important dimensions. Twenty-six situations that were likely to get a graduate student to consider dropping out of the program were reduced to three dimensions: academic failure, interpersonal problems with faculty, and problems due to fate, i.e., situations not clearly anyone's fault -- such as a bad experiment due to lack of subjects appearing for testing. Eleven self-rating subject traits were reduced to three dimensions: anger at self vs. others, an estimate of how likely stressful situations were to happen, and general anxiety. Finally, students were categorized by faculty ratings and self-ratings as (1) competent and confident and (2) less competent and less aspiring. Results indicated that less competent graduate students were intrapunitive about academic problems, but extrapunitive about interpersonal problems. There were also extremely anxious about academic problems but not anxious at all when the problems were due to fate (out of anyone's hands). On the other hand, competent graduate students were anxious in all three situations, and they did not blame self or others for problem situations. Apparently, they responded to anxiety by taking constructive action.

Coping with test anxiety has been a lively subject for study. The problem is common among college students, and it has been shown that test anxiety is detrimental to academic performance. Sarason (1975) found that providing test-anxious students with models of good coping helped engender better coping with the test situation. Houston (1977) compared anxiety

in a laboratory (threat and shocks) with anxiety in a college classroom (test anxiety). Intellectualization and rationalization were found to be effective coping in both situations; however, denial was effective only in the classroom test situations. Indecision about which coping strategy to use leads to more test anxiety, because no coping procedure is used. Resignation to an outcome and avoidant thinking were also very detrimental to coping with the test situation.

In addition to these studies of one specific situation, several efforts have been made to identify the full range of problematic situations in college, in an effort to study the interactions between person's coping efforts and a variety of demanding situations. This approach was taken by Goldfried and D'Zurilla (1969). They collected lists of problems encountered by students. Their final list included 600 possible situations, of which 181 were expected to have a high probability of occurrence for male freshmen. Of these situations, thirty were selected for study. Students were then asked to report what they did in these situations, and their estimated coping effectiveness was rated. With this approach, both the person and the situation could be examined in detail.

The second major change has occurred in the conceptualization of coping, itself. The most notable change is the shift from considering coping as a trait to considering coping as a process. In the Cross-National Study of Coping Styles and Achievement, for example, we identified a sequence of cognitive and behavioral steps that seem to define the elements of effective coping. These steps are, briefly: (1) Confronting the problem, (2) Engaging the problem, that is, taking

some action to resolve, remove, or otherwise alleviate the problem, (3) Persistence, and finally (4) Achieving a solution. Findings based on an international sample of children have indicated that children who use this problem-solving strategy do better in school and are generally better adapted socially (Peck, 1973; 1979).

Other researchers have also become interested in coping as a process. Lazarus and his colleagues (Coyne & Lazarus, in press) have argued for the need to understand better the question, "What do people do, once the problem has been identified?" Antonovsky (1979) has described a variety of resources that persons can bring to bear on a problem-situation.

In general, these trends indicate that the conceptualization of coping has moved from a somewhat general set of intrapersonal traits, or psychodynamic processes, to a more observable set of cognitive, affective and behavioral actions. Specifying the particular demands of a specific situation has also resulted in a better understanding of how coping is affected by the situation.

In considering these trends, what can we suggest about the study of coping in the future? First, it must be said that there has been steady, cumulative progress over the last two decades. We can expect that researchers will continue to refine our understanding of the process of coping. I also expect that we will see more work that examines coping in different situations. One cautionary note must be sounded. While greater understanding of coping in a particular situation certainly has value, we must also put these piecemeal understandings into a larger framework. College students face a multitude of interacting challenges and problems. Any thorough understanding of their coping must link together, in some

systematic way, their coping with classes, testers, teachers, peers, etc. While some understanding of their response to any one issue is worthwhile, it is also important to achieve a comprehensive picture of how each individual adapts to his total world.

I can't close without mentioning some work that my colleagues and I have carried out in the last few months. We have developed an instrument that incorporates the process orientation, and assesses responses to five kinds of life problems that everyone encounters. The instrument, the Individual Styles of Coping, is composed of Likert-type items in which persons are asked about their confrontation, engagement, persistence, and solution efforts in each of five areas: achievement, interpersonal relations, relations with authority, dealing with aggressive impulses, and dealing with anxiety. Preliminary work shows good reliability for this instrument, which is derived from one of the earlier Cross-National Study instruments. We are eager to begin looking at the utility of this instrument in a wide range of applications for the assessment and furtherance of college student coping.

Finally, I would recommend reversing, somewhat, the trend away from any synthesized assessment and depiction of the total, coping person. I still believe that many crucial issues facing college students involve such things as autonomy, identity, integrity, and the establishment of life-goals. In part, it is college students' struggle with these problems that crucially determines their success in college and in later life. As psychologists and educators concerned with the problem of adaptation, we must understand not only the resolution of test anxiety, for example,

but also the resolution of large-scale, complex developmental issues. I am hopeful that when someone reviews the study of coping in college, two decades from now, they will be able to say that we have learned how to study and assess coping with the critical tasks in this stage of life.

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